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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000758

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [BA](#) [REGION](#) [BILAT](#)  
OFFICIALS  
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND COMMANDER  
GENERAL ABIZAID'S MAY 8 VISIT TO BAHRAIN

REF: A. MANAMA 0727  
[1](#)B. MANAMA 0595  
[1](#)C. STATE 57548  
[1](#)D. MANAMA 0442  
[1](#)E. STATE 47881  
[1](#)F. STATE 45386

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) General Abizaid, we warmly welcome your May 8 visit to Bahrain. Your Bahraini interlocutors are most concerned about heightened tensions with Iran and will want to hear your views on U.S. plans to deal with Iran. The Bahraini government is deeply suspicious of Iran's nuclear program and its assertiveness in dealing with the Arab Gulf States but remains engaged with the Iranian leadership. Bahrain is closely watching political and security developments in Iraq, and you can use your meetings to urge greater Bahraini engagement with Iraq, particularly after the formation of a government. The domestic political environment is becoming more highly charged as parliamentary and municipal elections draw nearer. The security situation is somewhat unsettled following a rash of confrontations between masked youth and security forces in March, the April 26 detonation of an explosive device in an upscale commercial district, and Molotov cocktail attacks April 29 on a police vehicle and other property. There is no indication that American or Western interests are being targeted.

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Dealing With Iran  
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[1](#)2. (C) The Bahrain leadership is greatly concerned about the increased tensions between the international community and Iran. Crown Prince Salman and Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa visited Washington in mid-March and discussed Iran with Secretary Rice, Secretary Rumsfeld, and National Security Advisor Hadley. State Department Counselor Zelikow and Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Joseph visited Bahrain and raised the concept of a U.S.-GCC strategic dialogue addressing regional threats, especially Iran. Bahrain is interested but cautions that all GCC countries would have to agree (read Saudi Arabia) before launching the dialogue (Refs B-F). In his meetings in Washington, the Crown Prince requested consideration of a formal U.S. or NATO security umbrella for Bahrain in the event of a nuclear threat. During his meeting with Secretary Rumsfeld, the CP inquired about obtaining Patriot missiles.

[1](#)3. (C) Bahrain's relationship with Iran is complex. The Bahraini leadership is united in its suspicion of Iranian intentions regarding Bahrain and often see an Iranian hand in

incidents involving Bahrain's Shia community, which comprises some 70 percent of the country's citizens. They are convinced Iran seeks to develop nuclear weapons and assert its influence around the region. At the same time, Bahrain faces the reality that it must live with its large neighbor across the Gulf. The Iranians, angered when Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid accused elements from Iran of "playing with fire" in the Gulf, have been actively pursuing engagement with Bahrain, including a recent Ahmadi-Nejad phone call to the King and a visit by NSC Secretary General Larijani. Trade relations are reportedly growing. It is not clear that the Bahraini leadership has come to grips with how it will handle efforts to ratchet up the pressure on Iran if that includes, for example, calls for cutbacks in trade and engagement.

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Next Steps on Iraq  
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¶4. (C) The GOB has issued public statements in support of each step in Iraq's political development. It has remained quiet, however, during the period of uncertainty as Iraqi politicians have tried to form a government. You could brief your interlocutors on the state of play in Iraq and urge them to issue supportive public statements following the formation of a government.

¶5. (C) The Bahraini leadership is concerned about the spillover of sectarian tensions in Iraq to Bahrain. Tens of thousands of Bahrainis, Sunni and Shia, marched peacefully to protest the Samarra mosque bombing in February, and there has been no spike in inter-communal friction. However, some in the Sunni community worry about Shia political empowerment in

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the run-up to parliamentary and municipal council elections later this year. The government has yet to set a date for the elections (anticipated this fall), and some rumored amendments to the election law may be designed to inhibit Shia participation in the elections. Leading Shia opposition society Al Wifaq has not yet announced if it will field candidates in the parliamentary elections, but the group appears to be leaning in favor of participation.

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Domestic Politics Heats Up  
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¶6. (C) During the month of March, there were repeated clashes between small groups of Shia men and security forces. The incidents typically began with young masked men burning tires or trash dumpsters on the edge of a village, and throwing Molotov cocktails at police vehicles when security forces responded. Police routinely employed tear gas to disperse protesters. Villagers caught in the middle demanded that the youth stop provoking the police as small children, the sick and elderly were harmed by the gas. Following public statements by Shia leaders calling on the instigators to stop, the incidents subsided. The clashes were likely organized by the breakaway hardline Shia Haq Movement, which is in competition with Al Wifaq for the support of the Shia community. In this case, it appears that Haq overreached and provoked a backlash that could damage its longer term support.

¶7. (C) In a recent development, an explosive device that newspapers referred to as a "stun grenade" or "sound bomb" exploded the evening of April 26 in the upscale commercial district of Adliya. There was no damage or injuries, but word of the incident hit the international news, including CNN. A police patrol vehicle carrying two officers was hit by Molotov cocktails on April 29, and seven other vehicles were burned the same night. The Embassy and NCIS are in close contact with the Ministry of Interior about these incidents. The confrontations appear to be a further extension of Shia extremists' activities against the

government. There is no indication that American or Western interests are being targeted.

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